

Human Trafficking in Sudan: Roots, Context, and Current Challenges

Human trafficking in Sudan is not just a passing phenomenon but a result of a long history of violence, fragile security, poverty, political conflict, and social divisions. For years, Sudan's open borders, lack of legal oversight, and armed conflicts have created a fertile environment for this crime, affecting the most vulnerable and fragile groups in society, especially in conflict and displacement areas.

With the outbreak of the current conflict in mid-April 2023, human trafficking has become more widespread due to the lack of control and the collapse of judicial institutions, especially in some states (Khartoum, Al Gezira, and Darfur), allowing armed groups and organized gangs to intensify their activities, whether recruiting children, exploiting women, or smuggling people across borders. This security deterioration, economic collapse, and mass displacement of millions of civilians have created an atmosphere that permits systematic violations with complete impunity.

While Sudan serves as a transit and reception country for thousands of refugees and migrants from neighboring countries like Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Chad, its geographical location and open borders have also made it a major hub for human smuggling and trafficking networks that exploit people's need to escape their circumstances. These networks often collude with security officials or elements of the government forces, complicating efforts to combat or prosecute them. Amid the current conflict, warring parties have been involved in various violations classified as human trafficking crimes, including ransom kidnapping, sexual slavery, forced recruitment, and forced labor, as reported by local and international sources and victim testimonies.

Women and girls constitute the majority of victims, subjected to sexual exploitation, forced marriages, or inhumane conditions as domestic workers or in military facilities. Children abducted or lured to work in conflict zones are forcibly recruited for military activities or exploited in begging and trade networks. Some refugees, especially from Ethiopia and Eritrea, have been vulnerable to sexual exploitation and ransom captivity, or subjected to sale transactions conducted by local and regional networks alike.

The legal framework in Sudan criminalizes human trafficking, with the Anti-Human Trafficking Act issued in 2014 and amended in 2021, establishing the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking. Sudan has also ratified the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Palermo Protocol, which defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, or harboring of individuals using force, threat, or deception for exploitation purposes. One significant initiative was the "Khartoum Process," a partnership between Sudan and several European and African countries aimed at reducing human smuggling and trafficking.

While it has achieved some results, it has faced criticism for focusing more on security aspects and border control rather than victim protection and necessary support. However, the lack of political will, weak enforcement mechanisms, limited resources, corruption within state institutions, and ongoing armed

conflicts have rendered these legislations ineffective, with little tangible impact on protection or criminal prosecution.

Human trafficking in Sudan is not isolated from the general context of state collapse but it is also heavily influenced by other factors related to economic conditions, internal displacement, racial and regional discrimination, and lack of protection. The international community's failure to exert serious pressure to hold accountable those involved in these violations has created a fertile environment for organized crime, where it has become a means for rapid wealth accumulation or for military and political purposes.

In the face of all these challenges, accountability remains one of the biggest obstacles. With the ongoing armed conflict, multiple controlling forces, a collapsed judicial system, tracking those responsible for these violations or holding them accountable according to national or international law has become increasingly difficult. Civil society organizations trying to support victims face numerous restrictions, making it challenging to document violations or effectively assist them. Targeted groups, such as women, children, and refugees, often lack sufficient protection and face significant barriers to accessing justice.

All these factors clearly indicate that human trafficking in Sudan is not just an individual crime or a passing phenomenon but a humanitarian crisis and an organized crime that requires concerted efforts for political reform, building judicial and oversight state institutions, training all workers and executives, achieving accountability for those involved, supporting victims directly, and not criminalizing them. Without recognizing the scale of this disaster, thousands of people will remain vulnerable to exploitation, and suffering will persist.